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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH HOLDS ALL CARDS IN
HISTORIC GOLDEN RING

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11. (SBU) Summary. A recent trip to the Russian "Golden Ring" cities of Sergiyev Posad, Suzdal, and Vladimir indicated that despite the existence of four official Russian religions (Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism), the country's traditional religious center is firmly Russian Orthodox. While an ROC representative painted a picture of perfect tranquillity, local officials in Sergiyev Posad blamed the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) for only looking after itself. In Suzdal, the leader of the schismatic Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church (ROAC) despaired at the loss of 13 church buildings to the Russian government, and pointed a finger at the Federal Security Service (FSB) for meddling in ROAC affairs. In Vladimir, non-Orthodox confessions enjoyed differing levels of prosperity contingent on their congregation sizes and property holdings. Vladimir Oblast officials suggested that all organizations existed in harmony and trumpeted the government's forced consolidation of local human rights groups as a way to control civil society. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Our visit to the Golden Ring to learn more about the ROC's relationship with the government, community, and other religious groups occurred against the backdrop of a landmark Duma proposal to return a significant amount of property and assets to all religious organizations in Russia. This bill would grant religious organizations ownership of all historical property -- currently owned by the Russian federal government -- in each respective organization's use, according to a February 24 article in Russian daily Kommersant. Should Russian lawmakers adopt and implement this proposal, it would cede the Russian Orthodox Church up to 7.41 million acres and make it one of the nation's largest landowners, according to an April 5 Associated Press release. Forum 18 religion reporter Geraldine Fagan believed the proposal to be fraught with problems, including significant resistance from the Russian Ministry of Culture. She told us on March 22 that the ROC's current property disputes with Baptists in Lipetsk, Old Believers in Moscow region, and the ROAC in Suzdal were all complicated and presented no easy solutions. Russian journalists also have speculated about the reasons and financial consequences for such a large property transfer, arousing suspicion about the proposal's architect.

Russian Orthodox Insulated in Sergiyev Posad

13. (SBU) ROC representatives in Sergiyev Posad painted a picture of cooperation and strong religious revival on a local level. Head of the Academic Board of the Russian Orthodox Theological Academy Archpriest Pavel Velikanov offered diplomatic overtures on our March 18 visit to the Sergiyev Posad Lavra, the religious center for Russian Orthodoxy just 60 miles from Moscow. After providing a short tour of the campus which includes one of the ROC's two seminaries, an academy for higher learning, and several

churches open to visitors, Velikanov posited close ties between the ROC and the city and federal governments. Praising Patriarch Kirill's efforts to strengthen the ROC's appeal across the country, Velikanov gave little attention to interaction with other religious communities in Sergiyev Posad. When asked about the Lavra's economic situation during the economic crisis, he pointed to the possible return of religious property from the Russian government to the respective confessions as a big plus, believing that the ROC had ample funding to properly maintain its assets. That said, he could not address questions on the source of Church funding.

14. (SBU) Deputy Head of Sergiyev Posad Municipal District Vladimir Prokopenko offered a different perspective, criticizing local ROC representatives for not doing enough in the local community and for offering preferential treatment to the Church's own people. Prokopenko told us on March 18 about two ROC projects in Sergiyev Posad which helped the local economy, but at the expense of those not affiliated with the ROC administration. In one case, the ROC financed the construction of an apartment building near the city's downtown area, providing top-notch accommodations to visiting ROC officials. In the same building, however, local residents rented apartments with insufficient accommodations for their money, creating an atmosphere of animosity between the have's and have not's. With regards to the Duma proposal to return property and assets to religious organizations, Prokopenko doubted that the Church would suffer any economic strain should the government follow through on this plan, and adamantly felt that the Church would never seek financial assistance from the city of Sergiyev Posad. In a separate

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meeting, former Sergiyev Posad City Council Deputy and current President of the Inter-regional Foundation of Ombudsmen Sergey Kryzhov told us on March 18 that he had been denied registration for upcoming mayoral elections, and he blamed poor relations with the ROC for his troubles. Perhaps because of his affiliation with the opposition Yabloko party, Kryzhov added that he would not be "surprised" if local Sergiyev Posad Orthodox powers had leaned on the appropriate people to block his bid for public office.

Schismatics Outmatched in Suzdal

15. (SBU) Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church (ROAC) Metropolitan Valentin told us on April 1 that his church faced serious obstacles in Suzdal, including FSB interference and government confiscation of ROAC property. During a tour of the ROAC's church museum, filled with icons and artifacts from the 18th to 20th century, Valentin complained that the Russian government had deprived the ROAC, formerly connected to the Russian Orthodox Free Church, of 13 religious properties (11 churches, two bell towers) in Suzdal. He handed us a letter dated October 20, 2006, in which the Federal Agency for the Administration of Federal Property announced the creation of a committee in Vladimir Oblast to review the origins of property currently occupied by the ROAC. Valentin explained that he had restored over 20 church buildings in Suzdal since 1977, all of which had been abandoned or used for things like grain storage during the Soviet era. By raising funds in the United States through the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA), Valentin and his colleagues rebuilt the majority of Suzdal's religious structures, helping to turn the town of 12,000 into a tourist center. He eventually broke from the ROC in 1990, complaining that he had been forced to report his foreign connections to the KGB, after serving as the official host for all foreign tourists to Suzdal since the early 1970s.

16. (SBU) Forum 18 religion expert Geraldine Fagan provided more details on Valentin's situation, telling us on February 12 that Valentin had actually made a deal with KGB agents in the late 1970s to "acquire" several churches in Suzdal, in

large part because of his desire to become independent from the ROC. However, the official ROAC-ROC split did not occur until October 1998. She believed that the ROAC might have registered the buildings improperly, and now faced the consequences of "stealing" the churches (Note: the Russian Orthodox Free Church was ROCA's official body in Russia until 1995, after which Valentin declared his independence and renamed his Free Church as ROAC). The efforts to recoup Suzdal church property from the ROAC could also be rooted in the government's past perception that Valentin served as a U.S. government spy.

17. (SBU) After receiving a letter in February 2009 explaining the government's intention to take ownership of the properties in five days, ROAC church members attempted to remove precious icons, crosses, and other assorted religious items from the churches. As they prepared to transport the objects, a FSB officer approached and forbade the transfer. Despite Valentin's protests that the officer had no right to prevent the ROAC's use of private property, he gave in to avoid additional troubles. All of the ROAC's belongings remain in the churches, just as they were before Valentin received official notice of the government's plan to take the property.

18. (SBU) While Valentin would not postulate about the architect of the initiative, journalist for the online newspaper "TOMIKS" Natalya Novozhilova bluntly told us on April 1 that the FSB organized the activity against the ROAC.

Valentin freely noted that FSB officials had ruined his reputation by labeling him a pedophile and crook in 2002, making him especially cautious in any interaction. He admitted that any number of groups could be behind ROAC's problems, but hesitated in giving any concrete thoughts. Novozhilova later explained that several priests in the Suzdal and Vladimir region were deeply involved in corruption (another possible connection to Valentin's problems), and that she was working on a story which would expose several high-ranking officials for being involved in activities "not suitable for a religious leader."

19. (SBU) Officially, Suzdal experienced no significant problems between religious groups or between the government and religious organizations. Suzdal Mayor Sergey Godunin told us on April 1 that minority religious confessions did not maintain a presence in the city, and that his office strove to keep an open door to all Suzdal residents. Acknowledging the difficulties which the ROAC had

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experienced, Godunin suggested that Valentin work with the federal authorities on the matter as it was not his jurisdiction. In addition, he made a special effort to separate Vladimir Oblast Governor Nikolay Vinogradov from his Communist Party affiliation, saying that the ROAC's problems are not a throwback to Soviet times.

Vladimir Government: Everything is Fine

110. (SBU) In the city of Vladimir (Vladimir Oblast), public officials insisted that the government existed in complete harmony with all local human rights and religious organizations. Human Rights Commission Chairwoman Lina Yakusheva touted the most recent accomplishment in Vladimir Oblast: the consolidation of human rights groups. Yakusheva explained to us on April 1 that the centralization was "necessary" because "we didn't know who these social organizations even were." As a result, she proudly stated that the government will be able to coordinate "controlled public events" much more effectively than in the past. Her colleague, Chairwoman for the Committee on Public Relations and Mass Media Anna Payevskaya, added that the Oblast government accepted and encouraged the free observation of all religious beliefs. Payevskaya called the current level of state-religious organization interaction "excellent",

evidenced by recent round tables and public fora held by the Vladimir Oblast government. Unsolicited, she mentioned two problematic issues in the Oblast involving the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church (ROAC) and the Muslim community (see below), placing the responsibility for troubles on their noncompliance with the law. Payevskaya concluded her thoughts by denying any suggestion that the ROC was held in higher regard than other religious groups, as "we value all organizations equally."

Property Holdings Determine Protestant Success?

¶11. (SBU) Assistant Dean of the Roman Catholic Church of Vladimir Ivan Kolesnikov told us on March 31 that his church must support the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Patriarch Kirill during the current transition, noting that Kirill is the only figure who could attract Russia's youth back to religious practice. Based in a 19th-century church in the center of Vladimir, the Catholic community only boasted 500 members in the entire oblast, with about 200 attending Easter Sunday services and only 20 parishioners coming on an average Sunday. Because of their low membership and attendance, Kolesnikov worried about the financial situation of the Catholic community, saying that he could barely manage to pay for heat and water at the church under current conditions. Should the federal government follow through on the Duma proposal to return government-owned church property to the different confessions, it would create an enormous burden for smaller groups (but not for the ROC). Past donations from Catholic brethren in Italy and the United States have kept the church afloat, but more financial help would be needed to survive the long term, according to Kolesnikov.

¶12. (SBU) In contrast to the financial difficulties facing the Catholics, the Wesleyan Protestant Church in downtown Vladimir appeared to be thriving, even during the current economic crisis. Pastor Anton Dmitriyev told us on March 31 that his organization owned the 40-room building, a former government kindergarten that the Wesleyan Church bought in 1994, in which he conducted Sunday services. Some of the reasons for the organization's success were its casual atmosphere, use of modern Russian in worship services (Orthodox services are conducted in Old Church Slavonic), and its focus on youth activities, according to Antonov. He indicated that his chapter has attracted over 100 local people (mostly youth) for Sunday services, with many participating in church choir performances and leadership forums. The Wesleyan Church of Vladimir also maintained close relations with Wesleyan branches in the United States (its former pastor was an AmCit) and other regional Protestant groups, including the Baptists. Antonov pointed out, however, that city government officials denied the Wesleyan Church's recent applications to hold church-related functions in centrally-located city parks, instead offering them space in Victory Park on the outskirts of town (the same alternative offered to anti-government and human rights demonstrators, he noted).

Small Jewish Community Pushes Holocaust Education

¶13. (SBU) Acting Director of the Vladimir Jewish Community Center Marina Krol told us on March 31 that their greatest

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success in the past ten years has been convincing the Vladimir city administration to conduct Holocaust education in its public schools as part of the greater curriculum, the only such program in the entire country. Because of her strong connections with Holocaust Foundation Director and Public Chamber member Alla Gerber, she and her colleagues had pressed upon the city government the importance of discussing the Holocaust legacy in order to reduce anti-Semitism in Russia. Additionally, in the course of soliciting U.S. government financial support, she bragged that the Jewish

community owned its own community center, a building replete with a small temple, offices, kitchen, dining hall, and library (the small number of books were donated by oligarch Roman Abramovich, according to Krol). She pointed out that the community's 2000 members consisted of a devout minority, plus a majority that strove to continue its observation of traditional Jewish customs. Her small community had not experienced any problems with other confessions, city officials, or the regional government, but had been vandalized by "hooligans" in recent years.

Vladimir Muslims Move Forward Without Mosque

¶14. (SBU) Vladimir Oblast Head Mufti Vafa Hazrat told us on March 31 that approximately 60,000 Muslims lived in the oblast, most of whom comprised the region's significant Azerbaijani diaspora and Tatar community. Hazrat explained that the Vladimir Oblast government previously denied the Muslim community permission to build a new mosque in the region. The absence of real opportunity to build a "proper" house of worship forced him to purchase additional property abutting a home owned by the community on the outskirts of Vladimir, which the community now uses for prayer. The Muslim community built modest additions to the home, with a multi-floor worship area that included a women's prayer area on the bottom floor (men's prayer area on 2nd floor) where volunteer teachers regularly conduct free Arabic and Tatar language classes. The mufti stressed the importance of these classes since the regional government had failed to teach students about ethnic minorities, nor about any religion other than Russian Orthodoxy.

Comment

¶15. (SBU) The ROC appears to be gathering steam under Kirill's guidance (reftel), although conversations in the Golden Ring suggest that the ROC is not overly interested in religious unity despite Kirill's efforts on interfaith dialogue. The troubles besetting the schismatic ROAC could result in Kirill regaining control of Suzdal's highly-visited churches in the near future, a symbolic triumph of religious dominance over the ROAC. On the other hand, forced property ownership would burden smaller religious organizations with poor financing, potentially closing the door on some Protestant groups that espouse beliefs different from the ROC unless they secure sufficient means from diaspora groups and overseas affiliates. Should the GOR take aim to prevent foreign financial influence in the religious sphere, non-mainstream denominations could suffer greatly.

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